



# Rhineland in Winter

A short story set in occupied territory, by Graham Price

**The eeriness of a devastated landscape was rolled out before him as he surveyed the shattered buildings and pock marked fields of eastern France in November 1918** — fields that he figured could never be fertile again, unless that fertility came from the numerous bodies of unknown soldiers buried out in what used to be no-man's land. The tangled barbed-wire had been cut away in numerous places and now a crowd of tired Kiwi soldiers from the New Zealand regiment, with horses waiting in front of supply limber carts, prepared for their journey into Germany. Some of the soldiers were excited, but many were bemoaning the fact that their demobilisation was put on hold, and it did not help that the day was moody with cumbersome-looking clouds threatening to release their bellies onto the forward command lines.

Captain Harrison Newman rubbed the stubble on his chin and looked down at his notes. He sat outside on a folding canvas seat not long after the grey dawn appeared, attempting to steady the folding table on uneven scorched ground, which he figured had recently been swept with a flame-thrower, either from the Germans or the Allied troops. At least it was away from the muddy fields churned up by shell-fire. He stared for a moment at the now empty trenches in front of him and recalled the day he first encountered mustard gas, blasting into the trench from an exploding shell. You only had a split second to get your gas mask on, or be blinded. He shivered, remembering the many men he had witnessed being head bandaged and led back to field hospitals by other soldiers, some of them wounded themselves. And stretcher bearers, often with their own blood on cheek or neck, had come back time and again to retrieve the wounded. As for the dead, they also were brought back behind the lines.

A Lieutenant Colonel came out of the forward command tent with a piece of paper in his hand. "I don't know how you do it, Newman, but you've certainly gone one better than our own correspondents. Here's authority for you to accompany us into Cologne. It's just come through from HQ."

Harrison stopped writing and turned to face the grey-haired colonel, whose deep lines on his forehead were something he had only acquired on the battlefields of France and Belgium. "Thanks sir. Of course, it must seem strange for you to be baby-sitting an Aussie war correspondent? Anyway, how I did it is irrelevant, though I just might have to thank General Monash for that."

"Well now, son, seeing that your own battalions are going home, or at least back to Blighty for the time being, aren't you jealous of that? I hear you did Gallipoli, then Sinai and Palestine, and then you've been with your Aussie mates here in France this past year. What more do you need to see? Aren't you tired of it all?"

"I've seen numerous slaughters, sir, but apart from Gallipoli, nothing like what's been going on here in France and Belgium. How can they ever put these countries back together again? Unlike Germany which has barely been touched. Sure will be interesting to get an eyeful of it when we get there."

The colonel brushed several flies away. "Damn brutes these flies, who knows what stinking corpse they've come off. I thought the little buggers slept during winter, but obviously not. By the way, you've got a nerve rifling through the jacket of that Boche lieutenant as he lay dying the other week. What was that all about?"

Harrison looked up at the older man, face florid with too many whiskies, he thought — can't blame him for that — but Lieutenant Colonel James Walters seemed a decent old stick — he'd come through those earlier battles of the Somme with only a wound to his left leg, and now walked with a slight limp. You had to be pretty keen-eyed to notice it, thought Harrison. He reached into his uniform breast pocket and drew forth a photograph. "*Oberleutnant Hans Helmut Neumaier, Iron Cross second klasse.*"

"Yes, he was out of the trench and in front of me with his pistol when one of your blokes behind me blasted him through the chest — two or three times. I tried to keep him alive until the medics came, but it was hopeless. Point 303's really do make a mess of a soldier's chest. But I'm sure there was no need for that — the Oberleutnant didn't have his finger on the trigger. I'm also sure of that."

"It wasn't your problem, Newman. You should have left him — just another of the many thousands."



Harrison waved the photograph. “He knew he wouldn’t last long. . . and I promised him. . . to find his family and tell them that he died bravely, as an officer and a soldier should. These were his last words. . . Bitte, please, find meine familie und tell dass. . . iche meine duty. . . meine vife. . . meine daughter. . . It was somewhat a mixture of German and English but I knew what he wanted.”

“And how and where did you ever think that you might find this family? This place is not as tiny as the Isle of Wight, you know.”

Harrison returned the photograph to his breast pocket. “As fate would have it, according to the back of this photograph they live on a farm near a village just out of Cologne. He names his wife and daughter.”

The colonel sniffed. “Well, Monash’s authority or not, you’re going to be under my watch, so I don’t want you wandering about the countryside alone. You might think that this armistice has solved everything, well it hasn’t. There’s a revolution going on in Germany now with fighting among the socialists and the fascists and God knows who else — all scrambling for the top job. The war is not over, captain, in fact a different kind of war has begun. They’ve gone from an autocratic kingdom to an unstable republic virtually within a couple of weeks, with a number of gangs clashing for supremacy in Berlin, Munich, and most major cities. I wouldn’t be surprised to find the same order in Cologne when we get there.”

Harrison lit up a cigarette and drew deeply. “So, what do you propose? I have to find his family. I swore to him I would do that.”

“Listen, Newman, I’m not a heartless old bastard. I know how you feel, even if it is in sympathy with the other side that has caused us thousands of our own lives. These young Boche men, teenagers most of them, were dragged into this mess by their leaders and I can understand how they felt threatened, loving their fatherland as they did. But aren’t you pushing your sympathy a little too far? We didn’t start this bloody war.”

Harrison tapped his cigarette out on the edge of the table. “Just lend me one of your corporals or privates, sir, and I promise we won’t go seeking trouble. I’m sure the villages and towns around Cologne won’t be hiding any storm-troopers or such. The people will simply be civilian farmers trying to eke out a living in circumstances not of their making. Anyway, this bloke’s an old man. What was he doing in the army at age 42?”

“They had to pull in as many as they could. As I said, I’m not a heartless bastard, so when we set up base in Cologne I will give you Corporal Thomas who’s been virtually screaming about going home to New Zealand. It will get him out of my hair for a time. He’s a brilliant sniper too, which hopefully you won’t have any need to appreciate. Speaks a smattering of German and French. The two of you can reconnoitre the villages around Cologne to your hearts’ content, but be warned, you will find returned Boche soldiers wherever you may go, and some of them won’t be acting like spring pansies. Food is short, much is rationed, and the black-market is rife. If you go in bearing gifts as the Magi once did, you may find yourselves fronting something far worse than King Herod. They haven’t much to lose now.” He turned to re-enter the tent, paused and swung around: “Oh, you mentioned the Oberleutnant had an Iron Cross. Where is it now?”

“I don’t know.” lied Harrison, feeling the medal under his uniform close to his left breast. “I imagine his own people would have taken it before they buried him.”

The colonel cleared his throat. “Yes. . . well. . . as long as you didn’t nick it. That’s theft, you know. I don’t agree with those sorts of goings on. Souveniring pistols, knives okay, but personal items, it’s not on. It’s just not on.”

At 0900 hours their battalion as part of the regiment, moved out. Flanking them to the north along the Rhine were British occupying troops then further to the north the Belgians, and to the south, the Americans, but occupying the largest swathe of German Rhineland further south, were the French. “Going to have a ton of trouble there,” grunted Lieutenant Colonel Walter, “I don’t trust the French. . . too many old grievances there. Most of them will be looking for revenge and it goes back centuries. I’m rather glad that the Yanks have them on their right wing and not us. Perhaps the Americans can settle them down, though I have my doubts.” He was in the front passenger seat of the staff car — which he preferred — with the corporal driver and with Harrison in the back with the colonel’s adjutant, Captain Peter Isaacs.

The Vauxhall D-type tourer had seen better days — scarred from shrapnel damage on its off-side panels and bonnet from a shell exploding close by in August. There were small pieces of shrapnel still embedded around the edges of the radiator, which somehow did not cause any leaks — the driver preferring to leave things as they were, considering the engine was not overheating. A star-shaped crack had recently appeared on the windscreen caused by a sniper’s bullet. The corporal had the hood back and the open breeze was not quite to Harrison’s liking as he looked at the grey clouds above. Ahead were



two New Zealanders on a pair of fine looking stallions, while in the rear the mass of the battalion's marching men, with horses and limber carts following in the rear. The military brass band — half way down the column — had been playing *Mademoiselle from Armentières, Par ley voo*, to which the troops were vigorously singing. There were quite a number of German troop stragglers making way for them on each side of the road, wearily heading for Cologne and further where they knew not what fate awaited them, and many began accompanying the New Zealanders by singing their own much ruder version of *Mademoiselle from Armentières: "Three German Officers of the Rhine, Par ley voo"* — all waving and smiling at the column of untidy New Zealand troops. Several Kiwi soldiers, somewhat fluent in German, belted out further harsh and rude sentiments to the Germans and the bandmaster, sensing that the atmosphere just might change into an unwanted brawl, quickly signaled his musicians to strike up *Colonel Bogey*.

"A peaceful invasion," said Captain Peter Isaacs, stretching in the rear seat of the Vauxhall staff car. "Something none of us really expected so soon. Sensible though, otherwise thousands more would have suffered." He leant forward towards the colonel. "Sir, I think we are going to be somewhat late for your meeting with the mayor, Herr Konrad Adenhauer."

Lieutenant Colonel Walter half-turned in his seat. "Bloody civilians. Well, he and his people have been waiting four stinking years for this, so they can wait a little longer, Captain. It won't hurt them to show a little respect for our unavoidable lateness."

"I don't think we are going to find much respect the other side of the Rhine, sir," said Captain Isaacs. "It's more like anger and unexpected humiliation at them having been betrayed by their leaders, and being exposed to this Rhineland occupation by us, their enemy."

Harrison Newman interjected: "We're not likely to have a problem from those poor souls, though," pointing to the German troops scattered loosely on each side of the road. "All they want is a good night's sleep in a German bed for once, and that's not going to happen easily. There are too many of them and they are so far from home. But I don't think we have to worry about them — they're worn out and all they want is to live the remainder of their lives in peace. Of course, the leaders may well be a concern, as the Colonel has previously informed us."

The staff car occupants fell into silence.

The convoy wound its way out through the shattered lands west of the Rhineland into what was a shock to the western visitors' eyes — narrow roads smooth and uncluttered by any bomb craters, lined along the sides with verdant grasses and trees, some still with their autumn red, brown, and yellow leaves holding on during winter, and at their feet a mass of colour settling into the abundant earth. The contrast was something they had never imagined. Here was a landscape untouched by the massive shelling of France and Belgium, and which was also practically untouched by allied bombs. The local population had almost been living in an aura of peace, broken only once in a while by the sound of the Royal Navy Air Service biplanes dropping bombs on the Zeppelin dirigible air bases at Cologne and Dusseldorf way back in 1914, or their successors of the Royal Air Force carrying out photographic surveillance, and then the often red and black marked aviators of the German Air Force — the Luftwaffe — flying in deadly formation westward for combat over France and Belgium. The sheep, goats, ducks, geese, and cows grazed and ate contentedly, oblivious to anything mechanical that might upset their daily routine. No sound of artillery, except faintly in the distance — no machine guns, no tanks. Whatever sounds of war there may have been in the background had been accepted, acknowledged as part of the daily life, then dismissed.

"This is what most of the Somme looked like before the war," said Captain Isaacs. "Shame we can't turn the clock back. These Gerries have got off very lightly."

"Don't worry, Captain," said the colonel, "They'll be putting on a show for us when we reach Cologne. Bowing and scraping and showing some slight acknowledgement toward our military superiority, but in their heart of hearts still believing they are the superior ones. Don't any of you forget that." He shook his right fist. "This is not a conquered nation. If it were, we would be in Berlin right now. It hasn't worked out very well for Europe. It's not a surrender, it's only an armistice with conditions attached, argued out by politicians with certain criminals still in control. The leaders should have been brought before an international court and judged for their criminality, but so-called better minds than yours or mine have seen to that and have compromised. I think this is the beginning of further trouble. But we are here to oversee the peace for a while in this barrier occupancy of the Rhineland, and that is what we shall do while we are here. Only the politicians know how long that is going to be. For my mind, I would have continued our strike right through to Berlin and then smack up to the Russian border. Those Bolsheviks are going to be hard nuts to crack in the near future, mark my words, gentlemen. There will be further trouble from both of these countries. We have not seen the end of it."

Captain Isaacs touched his swagger stick to his lips. "Yes, and I can see my Jewish heritage being trampled under by these new gangs that have arisen in this so-called republic. My people have been very successful in making Germany great in the past, bringing it up financially to one of the better economic nations of the world, but now everything is turned on its



head and these new nationalists are blaming the Jews for their misfortunes. This can only lead to trouble, then of course, there is the Bolshevik influence from Russia — the other side of the coin — trying to take over and form a government here. You're so right, colonel, there's further trouble brewing."

Harrison was kind of half listening to this conversation, not really absorbing it, but looking back at that gloomy day when he was wondering how and why Oberleutnant Hans Helmut Neumaier got the Iron Cross second klasse? His mind carried him sharply back to when he stared deeply into those grey eyes, which almost matched the grey of the uniform and the subtle greyness of the hair, watching the coughing and choking and the tangled web of words, mixed with the deep red blood now coming from his lips. The broken guttural English, virtually coughed and almost sprayed out at him with some of the frothing blood landing onto his own uniform, and which now captured his attention. "Bitte. . . please, miene vife. . . meine daughter. . . you must. . ."

Harrison thought of his sister back home in Hawthorn, Victoria. She was a nurse, but so far had not volunteered for overseas duty. Thank the Lord, he thought. And his own mother, the carer of three children, now all adults. Was Hans's wife also the carer of further children? Harrison had gleaned from the writings on the rear of the photograph, that there was at least one daughter now known to him as Kirsten. Were there others within that family and what of any males, were there sons also in the Boche army? If so, where were they? So many questions, so many viewpoints. He could hardly wait to find that farm somewhere outside of Cologne and bring this mystery to a conclusion. He tried to visualise how it was now that the war was over. A mother and daughter, perhaps living by themselves on a farm where, possibly, their produce was confiscated by the government so as to feed the armed forces? Perhaps the army took more than was necessary and left the women starving? He could visualise the bleak fields, the lack of livestock, the home needing urgent repairs, and soldiers passing by and taking what they would. After all, the military came first. The staff car hit a large pothole and jolted him out of his reverie. They were within sight of the city, with the twin spires of the Cologne Cathedral spiking into the clouds. This was a new world. A new adventure.

Cologne was almost as he expected, a medieval built city well looked after. . . clean and neat, with only the odd building showing damage caused by the Royal Air Force. The occupation forces moved in and established their authority. Captain Isaacs was still bouncing his swagger stick off his lips and humming.

"Well, dear old Mademoiselle from Armentières, she won't be here unless she's been kidnapped by German officers. It's over for these officers and men of the Reich — the thousands making their way back home. No longer soldiers, but one wonders what work there is for them now that munitions factories and others are shut down? As well, I suppose it's not difficult to imagine that there will be several hundred thousand widows, or more!"

"Not that their Kaiser cares," said Colonel Walters. "Abdicating his throne and nicking off to the Netherlands. I understand that when he got there he simply asked for a cup of English tea! And that old war-monger General Luddendorf, buzzed off to Sweden with his head still attached. I wonder how long he'll last there?"

The corporal driver broke in: "Oh, don't you worry, sir, those neutral cowards will look after him. Sweden, pah! Pack of bloody cowards. They did all they could to make things difficult for us." And he spat out of the car onto the passing macadam. The passengers again fell into silence, with Harrison thinking the comments were somewhat unfair, because it was either be neutral, co-operate, or you'll be fully invaded and conquered.

"That's enough, corporal," said the colonel. "Yes, they were playing both sides against each other, but what could you expect in a time of war?"

Captain Isaacs broke in: "I can't really forgive them for supplying Germany with all that iron ore — they made a lot of money out of that, and we copped it in the form of countless shells and bombs. Thousands of lives lost while the rich in Sweden became richer. If I had my way, they'd all be facing *Madame le guillotine*."

The colonel turned his head to face the rear seat. "Thank you, captain, the subject is closed. It's out of our jurisdiction, so I wish to hear no more about it. Let us just make this demilitarised Rhineland occupation a success. Goodness knows how long we'll be here — I've heard fifteen years, but it could be more."

After the meeting with Konrad Adenauer, Harrison went to the Officers Club where he secured the last available room for the night. Some of the other officers had gone to night clubs, and no doubt some to bordellos where bewitching frauleins would supply a night's entertainment. He was tired, but also eager to see the new Germany which now proclaimed itself a republic, even though civilian control was still uncertain with red flags and others flying around major cities. Many of the returning German soldiers were still armed and probably would not hesitate to join either the socialists or the so-called democrats or any other political gang that took their favour. Somewhere in the background as he nodded off to sleep, he could



still hear the singing from below: *Mademoiselle from Armentières, Par les voo*, then as he drifted in and out of sleep he could faintly hear the strains of *If You Were the Only Girl in the World, and I Was the Only Boy*, and into a dream-filled sleep he fell. . . to a cabaret in Paris where several long-limbed and scantily clad French girls were filling his whisky glass to overflowing, while a dyed red-haired effeminate French male was singing in the background a favourite French song: *Sous les ponts de Paris*. Oh yes, his mind did seem to play back to him. . . those lovely times in Paris, when away from the battlefields, the soldiers recouped and refreshed themselves and made themselves fit to return to the destruction of life upon earth. The melodic refrain was then blotted out by someone singing in a husky feminine voice the French National Anthem *The Marseillaise*. Surely not here in Cologne, surely not. . . but then he drifted into the deepest sleep he had known for several months.

At precisely 6.30 the next morning he was awakened by a heavy hammering on the door to his room.

“Who is it?” He clasped his right hand to his forehead, then rubbed his eyes. What ungodly hour is this?

“Corporal Thomas, sir! The colonel sent me.” Harrison threw the blankets back and hopped out of the bed in his underwear. The New Zealand corporal at the door saluted.

“Are you to be my bodyguard?”

The corporal was quite tall, well over six feet. His uniform had recently been cleaned, observed Harrison. There was a pistol which surprisingly looked like a Luger on his right hip, and he had a .303 Lee Enfield rifle slung over his shoulder. Harrison stared at the pistol again. Perhaps it had been the Oberleutnant’s? Just looking at it made him feel uneasy.

“Whatever you wish, sir. colonel’s orders.”

“Looks like you could start a war all of your own.”

“Can’t take chances, sir. We’re on foreign soil.”

Harrison nodded. “I’ll get myself shaved and dressed. Wait for me in the lobby.

“Sir!”

“Oh, and there’s some lipstick on your right cheek, you might wish to get rid of that.”

The corporal flushed. “Sorry sir, some high jinks last night with the frauleins of Cologne.”

Harrison laughed. “On your way, soldier.”

“I’ve two horses outside, sir, compliments of the colonel. Can you ride?”

“What? Of course I can bloody-well ride. How the devil do you think I managed in Sinai and Palestine with those bright-eyed Light Horse boys?”

“Sir. . . Yes sir! Ah, I’ve got us a ration pack for breakfast, to save time. . . thought we could eat on the road.”

“That’s fine, corporal, now move yourself.”

Unexpected though it was, it didn’t take them all that long to find the Neumaier farm outside of Cologne. They had been trotting along a tree-lined lane about three kilometres out of Cologne in the late afternoon, and decided to give the horses a rest. “Could do with some refreshments,” said Corporal Thomas. “Here, sir, some extra sandwiches I conned out of the Officers’ Club kitchen. A bit dry now, but still edible. Amazing what using the colonel’s name will do for you. Didn’t think using yours would make much of a diff. Sorry about that, but it pays to be a little more than cheeky sometimes. Only way to get on in the world.”

“I’d expect no less than that from you, corporal. Now let’s just dispense with these bloody titles, for Christ’s sake. I’m a captain simply because of my war correspondent status. You’re an NCO as you’ve risen in the ranks ‘cos it’s something brilliant you’ve done of the field. . . I don’t know. . . and I don’t bloody-well care much either. . . perhaps you’ve saved someone’s life, or even licked up to a major or captain or two at the right time. Damn it Barry Corporal Thomas, my name is Harrison Newman. Kick the title captain, it’s just a formality. Call me Harry and I shall call you Barry. There, it rhymes, bloody believe it. . . Harry, Barry. What more could you ask for?”





“Fine by me sir, sorry. . . Harry. Ah. Not much used to calling officers by their first name, but I guess if I ever met Hindenburg I might call him somewhat less. . . like General Obers shite!”

“No need to be crude, Barry me boy. Though I sympathise with you. It would have been better if he had gone far, far away after his so-called retirement, in what was it? 1910 or 1911 I think. But then, I suppose he was too much of a hero to the German people, having taken part in the massive defeat of Russia in earlier days.”

“History repeated, you reckon?” said corporal Thomas, munching into the chicken sandwich from the Officers’ Club kitchen. “Hey, not bad this. I should have collared a few more. Oh Lord, look at that!”

His right arm was pointing up the hill to the crossroads. “Must be a couple of hundred of them buggers there, Harry. Marching back home to Berlin or God knows where. . . some of them still wearing their helmets. . . got rifles too. Will you look at the pack of them Gerries! We’d better make ourselves bloody-well scarce behind those trees.”

Harrison Newman climbed down from his horse. “I don’t think we are much of a threat to them. All they want is to get home as fast as they can to their loved ones. Just settle down and wait, Barry, old son. They’ll be gone sooner than later.” But the corporal had pulled the .303 Lee Enfield rifle from the scabbard strapped onto the saddle, shoved a bullet into the breech and flicked off the safety.

“Just the same, Harry old friend, in case they get a little too curious!” He patted the crossed ammunition pouches on his jacket. “And I’ve got plenty more where these little sniffers came from. Worry not Capitano. I could take down fifty of them before they know what’s hit them.”

Harrison took the reins of his horse and walked to the side of the road. “Let’s get behind those trees.”

The house stood on a gentle rise looking like something out of a fairy tale — two storeys with an attic, built in German 17th Century classical style, which reminded Harrison of the drawings in some of his family’s children’s story-books. The building was set forward from several sheds and a large barn, and was mainly daubed white with a thatched roof that had seen better days. A red brick chimney with three pots and in need of some repair leaned toward the west. Close to the house grew several clusters of tall silver fir trees. Probably *Abies alba*, thought Harrison, as his eyes searched for any sign of human movement. He detected several cows beside the barn and a flock of geese near the house. The trees shielded the house on one side from any summer sun, and possibly the cold winds of winter. He thought that they had been planted too close to the house, so that when the pine cones fell, some would drop onto the sharply inclined roof. The timber front door had two small lead-light windows, beyond which he could not see. The windows to the house — not much larger than those of the upper section of the blue painted door — also had ancient lead-light windows, some with sections of amber coloured glass near the perimeters with a small diamond-shaped reddish glass in the centre.

So, where was the wicked red witch of his childhood days then, or even the shiny angelic good witch who lived nearby? Where was the monster that lurked in the cellar and only came out to devour naughty children? And where was the fair maiden that the golden-haired prince would save from the fiery dragon? There was no wolf or wolf-hound to be seen, perhaps curled up by the kitchen fireplace where within a large pot hanging above the flames an evil-smelling herbal potion was brewing. He shook his head and laughed. Can’t live in fairy tales or romantic dreams. But just then, as the two men were dismounting at the gate, there was a golden-haired angel who appeared from the side of the barn, holding a bucket — straight from one of his child storybooks. Somehow, he was reminded of his teenage readings of Shakespeare, in particular Romeo and Juliet. . . “*She doth teach the torches to burn bright. It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night as a rich jewel in an Ethiopie’s ear, beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear. . .*” But then it wasn’t night, nor were there any Ethiopians around. Nor was it Verona in Italy. . . It was bright sunlight and Germany, but even so, the sentiment stayed with him as he watched her sprinkle some feed for the geese that babbled and crowded around her. And the young bard of Verona came back at him, to sing so clearly within his head: “*Did my heart love till now, foreswear it’s sight, for I n’ere saw such beauty till this night.*” Night? Well, did it matter?

“Smashin’ lookin’ chick,” said Corporal Thomas, holding the reins of the two horses. “The daughter, p’rhaps? What do you reckon?”

“What? Oh, oh, perhaps.”

She had seen them and placed down the bucket, paused for a moment while a German Shepherd came out of the barn and stood next to her. Then they both walked steadily toward the two uniformed figures at the gate. Ah, thought Harrison, the wolf-hound! What else were they going to discover?



“We’ve either hit the jackpot, Harry me lad, or we’re about to be told to go to blazes by the enemy. Reckon that dog’s vicious?” The corporal moved to tie the reins of both horses to the short wooden fence in front of them. “Personally, I would bank on the latter by the way this lady is striding toward us. Too bold by far. Struth, should we really be here? There’s probably someone in the house with a Mauser primed and trained right on us. We wouldn’t stand much of a chance, Harry me boy, though I can’t see anyone behind the windows. There’s an open one up in that attic, or whatever it is. . . but it’s too dark in there to see anythin’ . . . could be some mongrel with us dead spot in his sights. Or her sights, for that matter.”

“We’ve come this far, Barry. . . sure we need to be here. It’s not Cinderella and the wicked step-mother, you know, even though that farmhouse looks like something unreal out of a kid’s storybook. Who knows, it probably has plumbing problems like all do. We might be able to offer a fix or two to their leaky drainpipes. And that roof needs looking at. Weren’t you a plumber back in civvies? I don’t think there’s been any men around here for some time.”

“And nice soft, warm feather beds, perhaps? I could do with one tonight.”

“Look! Better watch what you say. Let me do the talking. No one’s going to do any shooting with her near us.”

The corporal laughed. “But I’m the one with the ability to translate German. Where you gunna be without me, newspaper boy?”

Harrison bit his bottom lip. “I know some, just some. . . it won’t be that hard.”

But when she came closer she told the dog to sit and she laid her hand on the neck of Harrison’s horse. The two men were surprised at her words delivered in clear English with a slight Bavarian accent: “Such beautiful horses, long have I seen such . . . so many years past when the armies first went through.” And she turned toward them, flashing her grey-blue eyes and pointing to the German Shepherd. “Nero won’t do more than look at you, unless you do something stupid. You are British, there is no doubt, but not Englanders. So, why are you here? But before you answer, you are welcome to some food and drink within our humble home. Come!” And she turned her back on them and led the way toward the house with the dog at her heels. She turned her head slightly. “Oh, and bring the horses up to the barn. There’s a water trough there.”

At the door she said: “You are here for a reason?”

“It’s about your father. . . please, may we go inside?”

He knew that this was going to be awkward, and not only awkward but perhaps much too delicate for his English language to convey. She spoke his language, but did she really understand the nuances of his accent? They sat around the oblong table within the house with mugs of schnapps that the girl had poured for them, together with some bread and cheese, and they were feeling somewhat embarrassed, on edge, and fidgeting.

“This is my mother, Frau Sofia Neumaier,” said the girl as an older woman with a small blue head-scarf came awkwardly down the stairs. Harrison was surprised that for an older woman she was so slim and clear of skin. The younger one spoke again: “I am Kirsten Neumaier, and you have come as you have said about my father, Hans. So, what news do you have? We know that he was killed at Crevecoeur, but we have few details.” The mother sat in an arm-chair near the fire and looked at them apprehensively. The German Shepherd, Nero, lay close beside her, enjoying the warmth of the fire and watching the two strangers sitting opposite his mistress. Harrison noted that the dog was almost entirely black, with small light brown tinges on his snout and ears.

The corporal lowered his eyes and Harrison coughed. This was not going to be easy. He watched the blinking of Kirsten’s eyes, suddenly wishing he was somewhere else.

“Well. . .” he hesitated, then pulled out from his breast jacket pocket the photograph and the Iron Cross with its black ribbon. Kirsten was watching him closely. She observed his fair hair, his pale brown eyes, his light eyebrows and his forward chin. A determined man, she reckoned, much the same as her own father had been — so determined to join the German army even though he was close to 40 years. And who could stop him, after all he was defending his fatherland. And this newcomer, who looked at her not unkindly — a previous enemy to her country, but no longer now that the armistice had been signed. What was he?

Harrison handed the Iron Cross over to her. His hand trembled as she reached out. “This was your father’s. He died a brave man, true to his country, simply doing his duty to his own people, his very own fatherland. A brave soldier ‘till the end.”



She drew the cross to her breast and tears formed within her eyes. “Oh, you are so kind. . . so kind. . .” There was a terrible noise coming from her mother as the older woman saw the cross and suddenly wracked and sobbed at this news. It was too much for Corporal Barry Thomas and he went and stood outside the door. Within the house Kirsten Neumaier had taken her mother up to her bedroom and had returned to stare at Captain Harrison Newman. She sat in front of him, her eyelids flickering and her fingers moving smoothly around the Iron Cross. “You are not a soldier! You had nothing to do with my father’s death — I can tell. But you knew him for a time, this I also can tell.”

He looked steadily into those grey-blue eyes. “No, I am not a soldier. I am a war correspondent, but I have been with many soldiers, high and low, and I have seen death so many times, it is like a movie film repeating frame after frame after frame continuously. And I saw the eyes of your father as if in shock at what he saw before him just before he died. I saw what was there, reflected back at me, and it was as if my own father stood before me. And unless I have gone mad, I saw something like an angel with wings appearing above his head. I am not sure. But then an infantryman, perhaps — we don’t know who it was — had fired not once but twice, or maybe three times.” He slammed his fists onto the table. “I tried to save him. . . save him. . . but. . . oh, God in Heaven. . . !”

She reached out to him with one hand, the other wiping tears from her eyes. “It’s all right, *meine freund* — my father’s beloved *retter*, ah. . . saviour. You did what you could. You did, you know. . . and how would it have been if you had not been there to comfort him in his last moments? So, thank you. . . thank you so much. You were brave, more than brave.”

They were silent for a while, simply staring into each other’s eyes, observing, wondering, but then she rose from her seat, came around the table and sat beside him. . . tears streaming from her eyes. He looked up at her and then she leaned forward and kissed him. He thought it seemed so soft, so warm, such essential gentleness and release, and above all so comforting to his heart, but also he felt that there was some long term hunger in it. What had they unleashed?

## Epilogue

**11 November 1945:** Twenty-four year old Staff Sergeant John Andreas Newman, quartermaster with the Australian Imperial Force, stood with his khaki slouch hat in hand, and with head bowed at the grave of his grandfather, *Hans Helmut Neumaier, Oberleutnant, Iron Cross Second klasse*. The wind at the Eastern Cemetery of Cambria, France, was strong and penetrated his uniform. He shivered, bent down, and laid the posy of flowers before the cross. There had been some recent clean-up around the grave, and he wondered just who might be doing this, but the thought whispered away from him on the wind. All were gone, he considered — the family had been carried away from Europe to the four corners of the earth by the violent blasts of two world wars. He’d made the long journey from his army unit west of Berlin over the week-end. In Australia, his father Harrison Newman and mother Kirsten Sophia Newman would be waiting in Melbourne for news of his visit. He would sit down that night in a French pub and compose a letter, telling them that he had found his grandfather’s grave and was pleased at its condition. He would also write that he feared the Russians would be the next oppressors of the free world.

**11 November 1996:** Andrew Harrison Newman, correspondent with the Australian Associated Press based in Berlin, shouted “There it is, my love. There it is!” His fiancée, Isla Maria Mayer of Opladen near Cologne, clasped his hand and drew him to her. “I can’t believe it. . . surely not?”

“It is. Look, it is. You can read it for yourself: Hans Helmut Neumaier, Oberleutnant, born Bavaria 1876, died Crevecoeur, France, October 1918. Iron Cross 2nd klasse. It’s a bit faded. Someone has left some flowers. Now, who could that be?”

“Shivers! Your great grandfather! How exciting.” The winter wind tore around them, whipping at their coats and almost pushing them off balance. “Dad, back in Melbourne, will be pleased that we have been here,” said Andrew. “Such an incredible family history we have, and now there’s you my love, who will join the family in a further history yet to be unfolded.”

She snuggled into him. “I was going to tell you tonight over a glass of French wine, but. . . I’ll let you into a wonderful secret now, my darling. I’ve discovered that there is a little person in my tummy of great historical significance. I’m pregnant. The doctor confirmed it yesterday and I have this wonderful, strange feeling that it’s going to be a girl.”

**11 November of a near future year:** Flight Lieutenant Penny Kirsten Sophia Newman, wearing the blue uniform of the Royal Australian Air Force, had travelled from the morning remembrance ceremony at Villers-Bretonneux in France to Cambrai. It had been a long and tiring journey and the weather was not helping. She was wishing for a pleasant hot bath



in one of the French hotels in Cambrai, but that would have to wait. Her mission was close to an end — it was a 21st birthday mission to herself and her family back home in Melbourne. She walked the long cemetery road in her black uniform issue RAAF shoes, wishing she could take them off and rest for a while, but no, it was getting late and the cemetery would close soon. The service at Villers had been marvelous, such a caring and even if sad, commemoration of those long gone. But now, she was here to search out a very significant event of many decades ago for her own family back home. There were not many people about — most looking like stark lonely figures scattered like black crows among the crosses. Such a contrast! She had been told that originally the German crosses were black, but had been changed to white during the latter days of the 1970s, but she had some doubts about that. Not here. . . not here. . . she muttered to herself as she compared her family's faded hand-drawn map of the 1920's, to the rows of crosses before her. . . not here. . . nor there. . . am I mad, she thought, coming all this way perhaps only to find there is nothing, just on the say-so of dad and grandfather Newman. Got to be here, somewhere, surely! Oh for a good night's rest in a warm French bed with a soft mattress. Just then, there was the row she was looking for. Had to be. She turned and moved down, counting the number of crosses one by one. It was further into the centre than she had thought as she caught sight of Neumaier Hans Helmut, and then saw the word Oberleutnant.

From her shoulder-bag she took the black and white photograph of her great grandfather Captain Harrison Newman and his bride of 1919, Kirsten Sophia Neumaier, which had been taken on the steps of Cologne Cathedral. She laid the glass embossed photo on the grave together with a bunch of red poppies, while a single tear formed in her left eye, and slowly trickled down her cheek and onto her uniform. Then more came from both of her eyes. Her vision blurred. So long ago. . . such a turbulent history. . . but now, old enemies blood pulsed through her own veins. It was that combination that had given her life 21 years ago, a long forgotten spirit which entered her, carried over from the days when evil attempted to conquer love and had lost. *Eros* was the winner.

She leant and kissed the top of the memorial. "Your heart is my heart, Hans Helmut Neumaier, your blood is my blood. . . your tears are my tears."

Oh, surely there can be no more war, no more weeping over those lost on battlefields, no more burying sons and daughters even before the parents own deaths? It was all crazy, madness. But she knew that was the reason she had become a member of the Royal Australian Air Force, to help protect democracy against evil. It was not perfect, never would be, but it's the best we've got, she thought. We have to protect it and nourish it. As if in agreement there was a break in the clouds and the sun briefly shone through. The fragile warmth was welcome and she stared up at the sun for a moment and thought how it had ruled there in the sky during 1914-1918 and observed all the fighting and devastation upon the land on which she now stood. If you had a heart, she thought, you surely would have stopped all of this! The glass covered photograph brightened a little with the sunshine, and she whispered: "There's the son-in-law you never really knew, Hans Helmut Neumaier, and we shall never know if you ever intended to shoot him or not. Perhaps it's because you paused for a moment, considered your own humanity? Or was it that you saw the future in his eyes? A future that, at many times, would be peaceful? Oh. . . Hans. . . Hans. . . ! Did you really see something in my great great grandfather's eyes? Did you sacrifice yourself so that even today, I might stand here and thank you for giving me such a wonderful, caring family? I love you Hans Helmut for what you may have done to bring about that marriage between Kirsten and Harrison. She nodded toward the grave: "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." Well, she thought. . . they weren't exactly friends. . . but they could have been, given better circumstances.

There was a movement behind her and she turned quickly. The young man standing there had hair showing at the sides of his peaked cap which was almost as blonde as her own. He smiled. "I didn't mean to startle you, but how do you know this grave?" She recognised the uniform he was wearing: it was German Air Force —Luftwaffe— a dark blue dress uniform with yellow epaulettes and insignias. She also recognised the ranking: Oberleutnant, or First Lieutenant, the same as her great great grandfather. She fought for words. . . this was so unexpected. . . "Who. . . who *are* you?"

"Hans Neumaier at your service, Fraulein Lieutenant."

She gasped. "Surely that's not possible? Is this some kind of a trick?"

His smile changed to something less welcoming and he shook his head. "I'm unsure as to what you mean."

"You have my great great grandfather's first name and surname! Tell me what this is all about. Tell me!"

"Oh, I see. . . yes. . . I do see. The lovely Fraulein has come from Australia. . . yes, I see that it is Australia. . . to give remembrance at a family grave. If that is so, then we must be distantly related, because the gentleman lying there was first cousin to my great great grandfather, Klaus Helmut Neumaier."



The silence that grew between them seemed to draw her closer into shock, only broken by the noise of the wind that snapped around them, charging at the corners of their jackets like a grasping jackal.

She shifted her feet on the uneven ground. It was instinctive. “You’re a pilot, I see.”

He nodded. “And you?”

“Systems controller. That’s all you need to know for the moment, Herr Neumaier. . . and I suppose,” she said, still looking apprehensively at him, “I suppose you are going to tell me that your second name is Helmut?”

He gave a slight chuckle. “No, fair lady, it is Gustav, after an uncle of mine.”

“I’m sorry. It has come to me as a shock — it’s the last thing I would have expected to find here. What a scary coincidence. . . it is unreal. I suppose you know that Newman — which is my own surname — and Neumaier, are much the same? Mine apparently was Anglicised from the original.”

He stared into her grey-blue eyes. “Just as many were in the old days so that they could fit more graciously into a new country.”

She gave a tight smile. “But much more difficult for them to change their accent!”

“I’m sure it balanced out after a time. Well now, look at you. . . one would never know from your speech that your ancestors were the same as mine — Bavarian!”

She laughed then. “Not Prussian?”

“Absolutely not. . . never Prussian. . . never the overlords, the war-mongers, the princely rogues of ancient terror days.”

They laughed at the same time. He reached for her hand and she took it. “There are no Bismarcks or princes of the north in our family, only Bavarian farmers and lovers. My father has carried out considerable research into our family’s background, yes, as far back as the 15th Century. So, what I can discern — us having the same great great grandfather — we would have to be third cousins. I think that’s correct. I’m sure that’s correct. Welcome to your fatherland then, my third cousin.”

The sun had disappeared behind some heavy rain-clouds. He looked up. “The rain will come very shortly. I have my car by the cemetery’s gates. Come with me and we shall get warm and dine at one of Cambrai’s finest French restaurants. I know just the place. Will you come? Please come, my cousin.”

“I suppose it is a sleek black German Mercedes Kompressor. . . the car, that is?”

His smile was wide. “Oh no, mine Fraulein Neumaier. . . pardon. . . Newman. It’s a more practical Volkswagen.”

She laughed again. “Much more suited to an Oberleutnant, perhaps, than a General?”

He guided her out of the row of crosses. “You’re too clever by. . . by. . . what is it in English. . . by far?” At the end of the row they looked back and she said “You didn’t bring anything?”

“Ach, damnation. I left the flowers in the car. Perhaps it was the sight of seeing you that made me forget.”

“You do put on the charm, Hans Gustav. From that, I would deduce that you seem somewhat more Gallic than German. Are you sure we both are not descended from the rather more romantic French than the Bavarian?”

“Who knows, 13th-14th Century perhaps, but I am really certain that you will enjoy the especially aged French wine that we will sup this night, to celebrate the warmth of our new friendship. And I can assure you that Bavarians can be very romantic.”

“Yes,” she laughed, taking his arm. “By the look in your eyes, I’d say that’s quite possible.” •

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